

THE COUNTERSTROKE

BY

AMBROSE PRATT,

AUTHOR OF "VIGOROUS DAUNT, BILLIONAIRE."

SYNOPSIS PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

In the installments of "The Counterstroke" already published, it is related how three persons of high rank are given orders by one Mr. Perigord, the mysterious head of the secret society to which they all belong, to aid him in locating the three men at the head of the nihilist organization in Europe, and to help destroy its power. One of the three men is Lord Francis Cressingham, who lost his post as secretary to the British ambassador to the court of the Czar through the intrigues of a woman nihilist—Madame Virella, Countess of Houdens. The second was Count von Oeltjen, who was compelled to resign as chief of staff to the Kaiser's embassy in London through the intrigues of the same woman. The last of the trio, an Austrian archduke, going under the name of Prince Carlos, was also drawn into the web of the nihilist scheme, to his own danger. All three men are infatuated by her unusual beauty. In the case of Lord Cressingham, however, it is only a temporary passion, as he is really in love with Miss Francis Elliott, daughter of Col. Vernon Elliott, V. C. C. H. He finds immediately after getting his instructions from Perigord that Miss Elliott has met Madame Virella and like every one else, has become intensely interested in her. Lord Cressingham tries to warn Miss Elliott, but she is against him. She is unable to explain his reasons, he creates suspicion against himself. Lord Cressingham, who is specially detailed to watch Mme. Virella and get certain information from her, fails to satisfy his superior, and von Oeltjen is sent to Vienna on his last mission. von Oeltjen arrives at Lord Cressingham's apartment at midnight. Miss Elliott appears there. While she is giving him warning of a plot against his life, she is suddenly knocked at the door. Miss Elliott hid in an adjoining room as Miss Virella appeared. She tried to throw herself into her arms, but he scorned her. After a stormy scene she left, and Cressingham escorted the individual Miss Elliott to her cab. He noted two men coming after her carriage. After a stormy scene the next day, after another unsatisfactory interview with Mme. Virella, Lord Cressingham finds Miss Elliott has returned to her home, and, becoming alarmed for her safety, institutes a search for her. Perigord makes one of his mysterious appearances in this journey and tells him that he has been kidnapped by mistake in place of Mme. Virella. The captive is put on board a yacht and sent to an unknown destination. Perigord then announces his intention to kidnap Miss Virella herself and orders Cressingham to act as her jailer, with the understanding that he is to warn the Englishman Prince Carlos as to the cause of Mme. Virella and wants to kill the lord. She is brought to his home as arranged and a stormy interview ensues between them and Lord Cressingham. It is ended by the arrival of von Oeltjen and two women, who drug Mme. Virella once more and carry her off to an unknown destination. This document takes place at a 2 m.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Torture of the Thumbcrew.

The drive was long and wearisome; just before daylight broke they departed from the high road to enter an avenue of leafless trees, and in the gray light of dawn drew up at last before the ruins of a grand old manor house built in the best Elizabethan style, but long given over to decay. Cressingham with much surprise recognized the place as the property of old Lord Sedgewick, a remote connection of his family, and knew, therefore, that he must be in Kent and not far distant from the sea. The whole house was dark, and seemed deserted. Oeltjen led the way to the farthest door of the left wing, which he opened with a latch-key. Entering, they climbed by match-light a flight of narrow, winding stairs and passed along a dark, narrow corridor into a large double-bedded room.

Oeltjen lighted a candle, and throwing himself into a chair commenced at once to undress himself. "You must excuse me," he remarked, "but I'm tired. I have not rested these eight-and-forty hours."

"But what am I to do?" said Cressingham.

"Well, I can't say, unless you follow my example. There is no one in the place except Perigord's servants and his prisoners. Perigord himself will not arrive before the evening."

"Then why the dickens was I brought here?"

"To insure your safety; you are a marked man, my friend."

Cressingham stamped impatiently to the window, and when he turned to question his companion found that Oeltjen had got half-dressed and was already fast asleep. With a muttered oath he approached the other bed and cast himself upon it, a little more weary than he guessed, and presently forgot his discontent in dreamless sleep.

In the afternoon Oeltjen aroused him, and they wandered together through the halls and stately but cobwebbed corridors to the kitchen on the lower floor, where a servant in grave gave them cold meat, bread, and cheese and a flask of cider. Afterward they undressed and explored the house, but soon tired of that dusty task. Many rooms were locked, but those unbarred which they could enter all told the sad story of desertion and neglect. Furniture of massive type and old-world structure and design there was in plenty, but moth-eaten, dust-covered and deplorably decayed, while the carpets simply rotted on the floors. It was a spectacle and a warning to the wife weep, and Cressingham and Oeltjen were filled with generous anger at the shameful ruin that they saw. They descended at last to the ground floor of the right wing a billiard room which was a slightly better state of preservation and bore traces of recent use. No doubt the caretaker in his master's absence was to entertain the village champions there. At any rate, several cues were play upon, and several cues were tipped. The two friends, glad of such recreation, whittled away the waiting hours in amiable rivalry. In the evening they dined on the remains of the dinner of the other food there was none—and when at about 10 o'clock they heard the sound of an approaching cavalcade they were in condition of mind to welcome Satan himself, so that he brought them a relief from the dull silence of that sombre mansion.

The newcomers proved to be Perigord, Col. Elliott, and a tall and heavily-bearded Norseman, who looked every inch a sailor. Perigord gravely saluted them, giving Cressingham a word of thanks; then he introduced them both to the Norseman—Capt. Fagerholm, he called him.

Col. Elliott greeted Cressingham kindly, but with a certain reserve of manner. The old gentleman was a narrow-shouldered, thin, and excessively nervous person; his face suggested a nagging liver and cholerique disposition; just now he was on the quiver of anxiety, and in his striven to appear calm and unconcerned, his manner was unconsciously pathetic, and his eyes constantly appealed to one with the unspoken words: "Am I not quite a Spartan?" Please do not pretend to think me over-anxious for the safety of my child. Above all, do not pity me!" In reality, the colonel, though quick-tempered, was one of the kindest and warmest-hearted men in the world. As they proceeded indoors, Cressingham, who was very fond of him, whispered in his ear: "How have you arranged about your servants and the public regarding your daughter's disappearance?"

The colonel's lip trembled as he replied: "I have not seen them. Perigord met me at the station and gave me the news. He made me write a note to the butler saying Francis was with me at Dover, and he took the note to my house himself and explained matters; he was very kind."

Cressingham whispered back: "Who is Perigord, colonel?"

The old man shook his head. "I don't know, although I have known him for these ten years past. He's a right good fellow, though, and has done me many services. Francis is awfully fond of him."

"What!—Francis your daughter knows him?"

"Yes!" Here was more food for Cressingham's mental consumption, but he was not given time to digest it just then. Perigord had led them to the very end of the building, and now pausing before a ponderous iron-bound door, was fitting a huge key into its massive lock. The bolt shot back with a sharp snap, and through the opening a narrow entrance was disclosed—a wide and stately chamber, which, though lighted with waxen tapers manifold, was, nevertheless, so spacious that it scarcely seemed illuminated, and its corners were shrouded in actual gloom. The room extended from one side of the building to the other; three of its walls were slashed with narrow windows, now, however, closely shuttered and barred, and the fourth, through which they stood entered, was hidden altogether behind long, drooping sheets of rich embroidered arras, covering old and much the worse for wear. Two rows of stiff armor-plated warriors kept watch and ward, drawn up along the walls, their mailed hands threateningly grasping sword, mace, or battle-axe, forming, as they stood, a wide and splendid avenue to a dais at the farthest end of the apartment. Memory broke in Cressingham when he recognized the figures, and vaguely he recalled a half-fearful hour of his boyhood spent in gazing at those speechless emblems of a by-gone warfare age. More vaguely still, he remembered that his cousin, Lord Sedgewick, had once possessed the craze of collecting arms, armor, and the dreadful implements of torture used by old Norman barons and other feudal lords; his gleam of thought and found quite soon at hand a skeleton rack, reposing between two red-crossed knights; farther on two rusty, hateful-looking boots, and scattered there and among the mail, armor, and weapons, were a number of caskets, and ugly little beds of death.

With a shudder he turned from these grim objects to contemplate the living tenants of the room. On the dais a man stood, his back to Cressingham, his hands standing, black-clad figure. Approaching, he saw that the chair was of iron, and the man securely fastened there by bands of stained and rusted steel. His head was bandaged, but his black eyes sparkled with an eager and venomous brilliancy. He was thick-set, middle-aged and bald, and his face was of a low and vulgar type, with its receding forehead, nose flat and sprawling, like a negro's, jaw ponderous and brutal.

Perigord, last to enter the apartment, softly closed the door, then strode down the avenue without a pause until he had reached the dais. There he stopped, while the others gathered round him, his eyes fixed steadily upon the prisoner. "Rupert Klein," he said, his slow, sonorous accents strangely suggestive of calm and well-rehearsed resignation; "twelve months ago I saved you from liberty because you once rescued a child from the barbarism of a drunken ruffian. I thought for that reason there must be some good in you. I judged you now—only to find that my mistaken judgment was paid for by your persecution of my friend. I have reason to believe that his is not the only reason to your credit. I have better reason to know that on account of your past conduct you have been recently chosen by your society as an instrument for the perpetration of a certain crime—has I see I am not mistaken?" (The man had written in his chair.) "However, I am not to judge you now—only to seek from you some information which is in your power to give. I require you to tell me the name and whereabouts of the island where the chief of your society something enough to prevent your deceiving me. Will you speak? If so, nod your head, and the bandage shall be removed."

The man remained still as marble, staring at Perigord with his lifeless eyes. Perigord made a sign to the guards, who stepped down and fastened something to the prisoner's manacled right-hand.

"Two!" another pause. "Three!" Klein's face turned suddenly purple; for a second he strained like a tiger at his bonds, and then he nodded his head.

Perigord said: "Take up the gag." But scarcely was this done when the prisoner sent forth a wild, unearthly shout for help, a scream so full of physical anguish that it seemed to pierce the ears of his hearers' hearts.

It was, however, quickly smothered, and the man gagged again.

"Four!" intoned Perigord, his voice uttered in a low, sonorous tone.

Cressingham, who watched the prisoner intently, saw his eyes roll in their sockets and the whites gradually fill with blood. Feeling unmanned and sick, he struck his face white as death; Col. Elliott trembled in every limb; Capt. Fagerholm was livid with emotion. But no one spoke or seemed to think of interference.

Perigord, who stood by the door, uttered a groan so fierce and prolonged that it penetrated the muffled of the gag and was distinctly audible.

The horrid sound broke down Cressingham's control.

"I cannot stand this," he cried. "Perigord, you must stop this fiendish work; what are you thinking of? Gentlemen, I appeal to you—Oeltjen, Col. Elliott!"

For answer Perigord stamped his foot, and as if by magic five men issued from shadows where they had previously lurked unseen. In the hand of each rested a revolver. "You see," said Perigord with a sneer, "I have no need of your aid. My God!" cried the young man. "Do you mean—"

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"I mean that I shall brook no interference, sir! At a nod, two of the men approached, and before Cressingham had recovered his surprise his wrist and arm were grasped and he was helpless. Perigord, coldly returned to business; "Six!" he said.

Klein's eyes, which had shone with a light of hope during the altercation, grew dull with despair. He nodded his head. A second time was the bandage removed.

"Water!" he gasped. A cup was put to his lips, which he drained at a draught.

"Now!" said Perigord.

"The island of Gotiska," he muttered faintly.

"Where is that?"

"North of Gotland, in the Baltic."

"Gag him," said Perigord quietly. When this was done: "Put the screw on his left thumb, the point well beneath the nail; work it, the screw over to examine their work." "That is well; now turn firmly but not too quickly. One!"

Klein gave a muffled shriek of agony.

"For God's sake stop; this is wanton. The fellow has told you!" almost sobbed Cressingham, whose eyes stood teared of generous rage.

"Lies!" returned the other briefly, "too three!"

Klein, groaning horribly, nodded his head, continuing to groan after the gag was gone.

"Well," said Perigord, for the first time showing some impatience; "speak quickly and the truth; this is your last chance to save yourself the torture of the boot!"

"Archipelago; Anarchos!" gasped the prisoner between his moans.

Perigord drew a sharp breath and his eyes glittered like steel.

"Latitude and longitude?" he demanded quickly.

"I don't know. It lies midway between Kos and Amargos."

"To be continued to-morrow."

The Suspense Was Too Much.

From the Cleveland Leader.

"See here," thumped the inmate of murderers' row, "ain't there now again? crool and unusual punishment?"

"Yes," answered the warden, "An' ain't I ter be hanged next week?"

"I am afraid you are."

"Then what d'yer mean by sendin' me a bunch of story papers to read that ain't got nothin' but continued stories in 'em?"

"Turkey or Greece?"

"Turkey! For the love of God take off the screws!"

Perigord eyed him narrowly, still perhaps in doubt, but at that instant came a fearful interruption. The door through which all had entered was suddenly thrown open, and a loud, strident voice cried out in Russian: "Master, master, save yourself. Come quickly this way. The Anarchists! a bomb, a bomb!"

A man stood in the doorway, pale and quaking, imploring wildly with his hands.

Perigord demanded sharply: "Where?" but the man, unable to speak, pointed a trembling finger at the farthest wall.

Alarmed, the companions of the servants had taken fright, and without asking permission were retreating in disorder. Cressingham alone of the others had understood the man's words, and he explained them briefly to his companions, while Perigord stood dumbly listening.

Something that he appeared to hear roused him soon to action. "Come, gentlemen," he cried; "the fellow may be right! We had better get ready."

"And leave that poor wretch to die perhaps?" cried Cressingham indignantly.

The young man sprang to the dais and attempted to lift the chair bolt, seeing at once the uselessness of the attempt to release the prisoner. He found the chair, however, fastened firmly to the floor. Putting forth all his strength, he tried to uproot the screws, catching a dull booming roar beneath his voice. While he strained he was caught suddenly in a giant's grip and borne struggling vainly at a swift pace down the avenue of armored figures, his ears ringing with the clank of shields and desperate calls for help. But he was held powerless as a babe, and when Perigord put him down outside the door he was breathless and exhausted.

They had not long to wait for further developments. A second explosion followed quickly on the heels of the first, and this a fatal one. First, a sharp report like the firing of a cannon close at hand; then a rending crash, which shook the floor beneath their feet and made the whole building tremble. Peering through the door, they could see for one short instant the farthest wall of the apartment crumpling up and collapsing inwards, and a clattering silence and a thunderous noise, which dwarfed all others by comparison; the air was quickly choked with dust, and all about their heads fell bricks and plaster with a wild and awful clattering. Silence and the dark succeeded; a deadly silence, a dense, impenetrable darkness. Cressingham stood stupefied and breathless, unable to realize the lived. He heard presently a slight rasping sound, and a flicker of light some distance off. Perigord had struck a lucifer and stood calmly surveying the dreadful ruin around him. "Is any one hurt or injured?" he asked, his voice sounding strangely harsh and unfamiliar.

At the question Cressingham realized that his left arm hung limp and helpless at his side, but he felt it carefully and found it was broken. "Yes!" he answered, "thanks to you, Mr. Perigord."

Col. Elliott was badly shaken and had his face cut open by some falling plaster, and some of the servants were injured. Perigord, Oeltjen, and Capt. Fagerholm had escaped untouched. Presently they all made their way by a distant staircase to the ground floor, and finding the door locked, Perigord took the fate of Klein. They found him after a little search lying beneath a heap of debris, quite dead and mangled horribly. There was no need to free him from his bonds; the chair had been smashed to fragments, but Perigord ordered the screws to be removed from his dead hands and his body taken to the kitchen.

The gentlemen were still surveying the ruin by the light of a hastily constructed brazier, when they became conscious of the presence of a stranger who came upon them like a spirit from the dark.

It was Prince Carlos, who had been found by the search party. He was quite dead and mangled horribly. There was no need to free him from his bonds; the chair had been smashed to fragments, but Perigord ordered the screws to be removed from his dead hands and his body taken to the kitchen.

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